

{ DEMOCRACY }

The Current Situation

In *Public Interest Alberta's 2015 Priorities for Change*, the Democracy Task Force introduced its recommendations with the following observation:

“By almost any measure, Alberta is the least democratic province in Canada. Our province’s democratic deficit is deep and broad, and our current system gives wealthy and corporate elites undue influence and control at the expense of ordinary citizens.”

The Task Force identified detailed proposals regarding three top priorities for change in order to address the key concerns:

- Campaign and Party Finance Reform
- Electoral System Reform
- Strengthening citizen engagement in governance and decision making

It is encouraging to see that, three years later, the situation with respect to democracy has improved, as a result of changes made by the current Alberta government. The changes are largely in the area of campaign and party finance legislation, but also include the appointment of a Minister responsible for Democratic Renewal. As a result of these changes, the Government of Alberta has taken some meaningful steps toward strengthening our democracy – but there is still a great deal to be done.

In terms of campaign and party finance legislation, the new contribution limits are still far too high: the annual limit of \$4000 still allows for undue influence of money in politics. In addition, the government did not apply the new legislation to civic elections, with the result that corporate and union contributions, high contribution limits, and the absence of spending

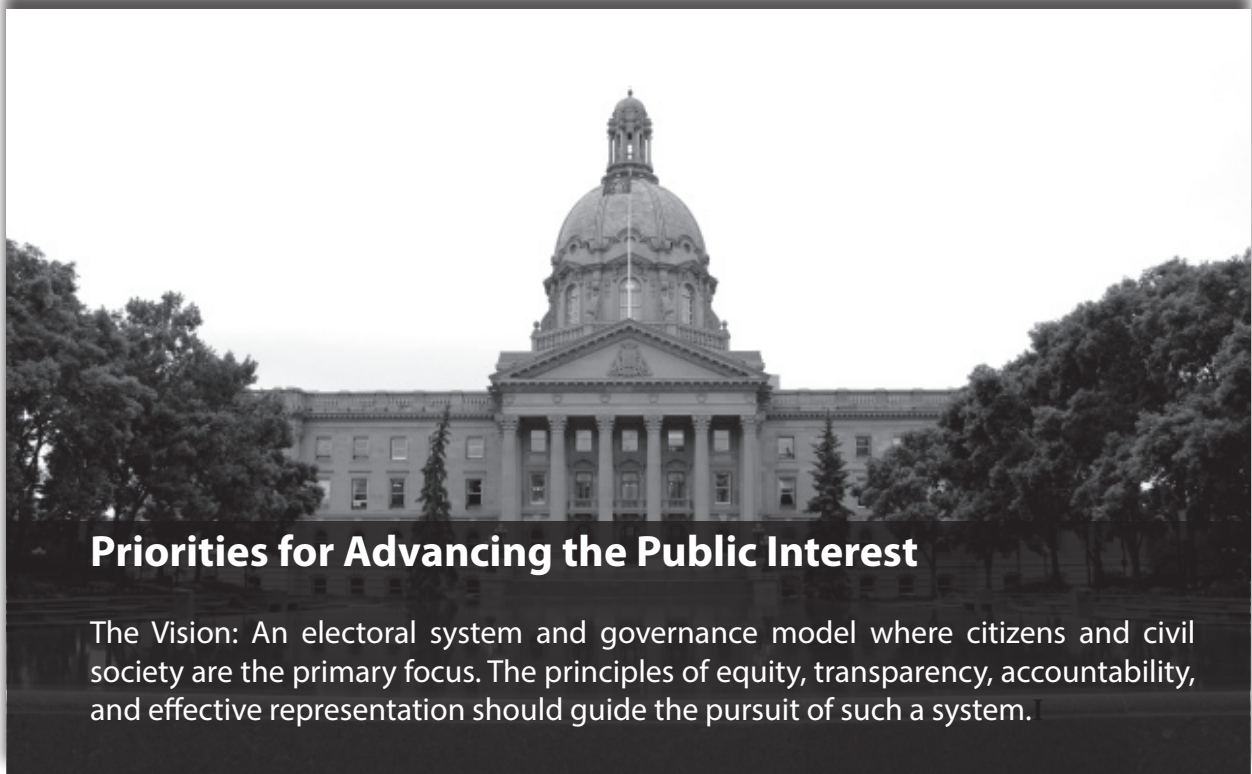
limits will continue to allow for undue influence of money in municipal elections across the province. As well, the recent emergence of raising money through inadequately regulated Political Action Committees raises further problems that will require additional action.

The area of electoral system reform still requires action: our first-past-the-post system continues to undermine basic democratic elements of majority rule, minority rights, and political equality, and significant ranges in constituency populations undermine representation by population. We have seen some solid progress in the work of Alberta’s Electoral Boundary Commission, but major legislative changes are essential in order to bring about comprehensive electoral system reform.

In 2015, the Task Force characterized the situation as follows:

“...the important decisions about legislation and policy are increasingly made by the premier and cabinet, without meaningful engagement of citizens and organizations; at best, ‘consultations’ by government are limited, perfunctory and ‘safe.’”

Unfortunately, the situation has not improved under the new government, and major changes are needed. Alberta’s concentration of far too much power in the hands of the premier and the cabinet also mean that the roles of MLAs, legislative committees, and the Legislative Assembly as a whole are marginalized, unsupported, and inconsistent with the requirements of elected representatives who exercise the legislative function in a strong democracy.



Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: An electoral system and governance model where citizens and civil society are the primary focus. The principles of equity, transparency, accountability, and effective representation should guide the pursuit of such a system.

A comprehensive and systematic approach to further democratic reform in Alberta should include the following changes:

1. Improve citizen engagement

- Put in place a comprehensive program of policies and practices to ensure systematic engagement of citizens and civil society groups in the development of public policy in our province
- Use the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s “Ten Principles for Open and Inclusive Policy-Making” to guide the development of policies and practices in Alberta
- Establish an Office of Democratic Engagement to support and monitor the efforts of government departments in meeting the requirements for engagement of citizens and groups in policy development
- Provide new supports for legislative committees and MLAs in their efforts to facilitate ongoing democratic engagement by their constituents
- Establish a Public Centre for Democracy in order to further foster a democratic culture

2. Remedy issues with our electoral system

- Reduce the current legislated 25% maximum variance for average constituency population size to 5%
- Eliminate “special exceptions: constituencies, which allow up to a 50% maximum variance from average constituency population size
- Increase support to MLAs to assist them in effectively representing their constituents and addressing their varying needs
- Replace the first-past-the-post electoral system with a model of proportional representation

3. Further strengthen campaign and party finance legislation

- Establish public per vote subsidies and campaign expense rebates
- Reduce the maximum annual contribution limits from \$4000 to \$1500
- Apply similar campaign and party finance laws to elections at the municipal level

4. Strengthen the role of our elected legislature

- Establish an all-party committee to consider how to strengthen the role of MLAs
- Limit the independence of the roles of the premier and cabinet